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## For Asian workers in the Gulf

**T**he Abu Dhabi Declaration is a timely and forward-looking acknowledgment of the problems and issues that have piled up on the expatriate labour front in the region. It emerged from the first focussed dialogue on the subject held in a labour destination country in the Gulf. The document, endorsed by 21 Asian and Gulf Cooperation Council Ministers, outlines a collaborative action plan to give a fair deal to the workers, who are largely from Asia. The key recommendation, that effective actions should be initiated within three months to root out illegal recruitment practices, in the countries of origin as well as in the host countries, and to promote more transparent policies and practices of recruitment and employment, could bring the guest workers job security and fair benefits. The practical outcome of the exercise, which builds on the Asian Regional Consultative Process on Overseas Employment and Contractual Labour, or the Colombo Process, will be keenly watched in India and other South Asian countries.

The Gulf Arab states depend on imported labour but are wary of the impact of the numbers on their demography: the six GCC members have a population of 35 million, including 13 million expatriates. Their response is to assert the 'temporary' nature of the workers' presence: "Asian workers are contracted workers, not what some call immigrant workers." While this anxiety, a sub-text in the Declaration, is understandable, the Gulf Arab states need to get serious about implementing labour protection measures, and give expatriate workers a better deal in wages, housing, and health. The booming GCC economies, while reaping the benefits of record oil prices, should be mindful of the fact that they are facing increased competition from other countries in need of skilled labour. The gap between wages in the GCC and some robust Asian economies is closing, moderating the appeal of the Gulf market. In the case of Indian workers, the rising rupee has fuelled acute discontent, which has expressed itself in a series of strike actions and a rising number of suicides. The recently announced wage revisions in some sectors are encouraging. A wage structure that is linked to the cost of living in the host countries and a joint consultative mechanism to redress workers' grievances will certainly help reduce the discontent. India needs to consolidate the gains it has made for its expatriate workers through signing a number of bilateral labour agreements in the region by working out cooperatively with the Gulf countries practical measures in tune with the spirit of the Abu Dhabi dialogue.